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ABSTRACT

Because of the unique nature of community colleges, no single model or calculation of attrition can fit all institutions. Each college falls somewhere on the continuum between the degree-oriented junior college, in which students pursue a linear pattern of enrollment from entry to graduation, to the consumer-oriented community college, in which students' enrollment patterns tend to be sporadic or cyclical. Rates and types of attrition will depend on a college's position on the continuum and upon factors unique to its community. Different types of attrition, such as "stopping out"; leaving; and inter-quarter, intra-quarter, and inter-year attrition, must be carefully identified and analyzed so that retention efforts are directed toward the undesirable components and not wasted on functional or unavoidable attrition. At Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), for example, enrollment and attrition patterns are extremely complex. To obtain a balanced view of NVCC's high attrition rate, one must consider that a certain amount of attrition is necessary to keep the college a functional system given space and resource limitations and that much inter-quarter attrition is unavoidable, as schedule conflicts and departure from the area are the main reasons for leaving. NVCC is currently conducting studies of intra-quarter course withdrawal in order to establish exit interview procedures, identify withdrawal factors, and determine high attrition courses and programs so that appropriate changes can be made. (AYC)

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Student Attrition at the Community College:

The Need for Conceptual Clarification

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Attrition studies are rapidly becoming critical for all institutions of higher education, community colleges and four-year schools alike. The "good old days" of rapidly increasing enrollments, easily available financial aid, and extensive support of higher education by federal, state, and local governments have come to an end. Now, institutions must make every student count -- any loss of tuition revenue due to the premature departure of a student from his or her college merely adds to the already crushing financial burden.

In this climate of extreme fiscal austerity, community colleges are placed in an awkward double bind. On one hand, the cry from legislators, citizens, and students is for better service: higher educational quality, more and more diverse course offerings, and more concentration on the teaching of job skills in technical areas such as health and data processing. On the other hand, citizens balk increasingly at paying tax money to community colleges for what they are afraid may be "revolving door education" and "belly dancing and basket weaving" courses. Amidst all the clamor, the new federalism and the wave of local tax cut initiatives have reduced the funds available for education in any form, and community colleges are certainly no exception.

The situation is clear: community colleges are being asked to do more with less. Given that reality, college researchers and planners are being forced to move rapidly into the study of attrition. The emphasis on attrition comes from two sources. First, state legislatures are justifiably upset at seeing tax dollars spent on students who derive no tangible benefit (i.e., a degree, a job, a promotion, etc.) from their time spent at a community college. High attrition rates -- in some cases 40 to 50 percent or greater -- are extremely alarming when looked at out of context. From a purely funding

standpoint, attrition means waste, and legislators cannot be expected to "read between the lines" and realize that at least some of the attrition is not waste at all, but rather a signal that some students left before obtaining a degree because they never wanted one in the first place. Second, even when college personnel look at attrition figures, they see evidence that the open door of the community college may well be "revolving" too fast for some of their students.

The issues facing community college researchers are both financial and educational. Increasing austerity dictates that no effort be wasted; a committment to educational quality dictates that no student who enters the open door should receive any less than the education he or she needs or wants. Community colleges fill a crucial gap in the American education system between secondary education and the four-year colleges and universities. In order to weather fiscal "hard times" while still maintaining an open door to a quality education, community colleges must closely examine the problem of attrition. Where real "waste" or misplaced resources are found, policy should be directed toward improvement.

It is clear that attrition studies are important. What is not clear is where attrition lies within each community college. A casual review of recent literature on attrition and retention at community colleges will show just how vague the concept of student attrition is. For example, in the January 1981 - 1982 issue of the Community and Junior College Journal, Ralph Lee notes that "almost anything, within reason, contributes to increased retention..." (p. 7). Lee goes on to cite three "gross indices" for retention, including the ratio of program completions to overall credit headcount, the ratio of students continuing on to the next term to the overall headcount in the preceding term, and the ratio of students completing a course with a passing

grade to the total initial enrollment (p. 7). While these indices are useful, each one represents a different measure; where a college may do well in terms of continuing students, few of them may ever graduate. Thus, in this example, the college president or state legislator is faced with conflicting information.

In the same issue of the CAJCJ, McBride, Kellar, and Harvey note that "San Joaquin Delta College has a statewide reputation for having the unusually high retention rate 87.6%" (p. 9). In this case, one must ask what this rate refers to, and how can it be compared to another college elsewhere in California or the rest of the nation.

These brief examples are meant to show that attrition, and its counterpart retention, are in no way clear-cut at a community college. It appears as if the paradigm within which community college attrition is studied has been taken without due examination from the four-year schools. Student flow at a university is in some sense linear. That is, the large majority of students at a four-year institution are there to obtain a degree. Leaving graduate studies and non-credit continuing education aside, students at a university are expected to stay in school from freshman to senior years, to take many courses in sequence, to re-evaluate their goals and objectives periodically with an advisor, and so forth. Penalties for extremely poor performance and scheduling advantages for declared majors contribute to the essential linearity of a university student's education. Thus, for a four-year institution, the number of students continuing from term to term is of great importance as an attrition statistic.

The linear model of the educational process, informal though it may be, has dominated the community colleges for historical and cultural reasons. First, American education in general is highly linear. Students progress from step to step, and elementary and secondary grades are even numbered one

through twelve. The concept of forward motion and linear progress from one level of education to the next extends even to laws which require students below age 16 or 17 to spend a number of successive years in school, and even a minimum number of days in school during each year. Linearity is a fundamental assumption in the American educational system, and the community colleges have inherited that assumption.

Historically, community colleges grew out of junior colleges that were designed to do two basic things: to "add steps" to the linear educational progression that would enable students with academic and/or financial difficulties to prepare for a full-fledged university education; and to provide a modified form of higher education to those who could not afford or could not succeed at a university. The junior colleges either acted as staging areas for university-bound students who needed more preparation, or as the final educational step for those who could not attend a university.

The community college idea grew out of the junior college system, and added two new missions: first, community colleges began to offer extensive accredited vocational and technical training for those wishing to enter skilled positions that did not require a full four-year education; and second, the new colleges began to develop the idea of life-long learning. Members of communities who had long been out of school or who wanted more education in specific areas were encouraged to use the community college as a resource. To make this vision possible, registration, course scheduling, teaching methods, and other institutional aspects were designed with a greater degree of flexibility and responsiveness than ever before.

At this point, the linearity of the education system was broken. People were encouraged to come and go, using the community college much as they would

use a public library. The degree granting idea was not abandoned, but at the community college it ceased to be the sole raison d'etre.

During the boom years of the 1960's and 1970's, the community college idea caught on like wildfire. Fueled by federal and state education monies and by a genuine public desire for accessible learning, enrollments and programs grew by quantum leaps. Attrition was an issue beginning to be examined at universities, but the central problem at the community college level was how to keep pace with the demand for more and different courses and facilities. Televised instruction, extension campuses, self-paced learning, and other techniques were devised to cope with the rush of people through the wide open door.

Gradually, two archetypical community colleges developed. As Cohen and Brawer describe it (1982: 17), the archetypes are at opposite ends of a continuum. At one end lies the small college which still fills the role of a junior college. This archetype has 2,500 students, each taking a full load of four or five classes. Most students at this college would be progressing toward an AA, AS, AAS, or Certificate in the same linear fashion as would be the case at a university. Continuing students and graduates would be high in proportion to the student body as a whole.

At the other end of the continuum lies the archetypical urban community college, with 10,000 or more students, each taking a partial load. A large number of the students would be part-time, and, while many degree programs would be offered, few students in proportion to the whole student body would ever actually graduate. The number of students continuing from one term to the next would also be low relative to entire student population. In effect, the archetypical urban college would be serving a wide range of needs, goals,

and interests, and thus would be marked by high student turnover and a proliferation of programs and course offerings.

The definition of attrition applicable to the small degree-oriented college would obviously not be applicable to the large urban one. Primarily, this is due to the deliberate series of policy decisions which lead the urban school away from the linear paradigm and into a more mixed mode of educational process in which some students proceed in a "straight line" fashion toward a degree or certificate while others -- probably the majority -- tend to attend in cycles of one or more terms, then withdraw and re-enter whenever they feel the desire. The large urban institution in this case has chosen to let its enrollment patterns be driven by outside forces (namely, community members' needs and goals for education) rather than internal structure. Unfortunately, "attrition rates" or "retention rates" do not capture the vast complexity lying behind enrollment patterns at the urban college; neither is there a reliable way of measuring educational quality in a situation where many students are not even seeking tangible rewards from their schooling. In order for a community college to present an accurate picture of its attrition, it must begin by placing itself on the continuum between the linear-oriented school on the one hand and the cyclically-oriented school on the other. From this point, a careful analysis of the types of attrition and the components of these types must be undertaken.

A case in point is Northern Virginia Community College. Located in five campuses within the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, NVCC serves in excess of 50,000 credit students annually. Non-credit and community service programs excluded, Northern Virginia is the largest single higher educational institution in the state of Virginia, and one of the largest single community colleges in the nation.

If NVCC were placed on the continuum discussed above, it would fall very nearly at the extreme "urban" end. In the Fall quarter of 1981, for example, Northern Virginia had a total credit headcount of 35,282. The median age of these students was 26, which is well above the "traditional" 18-22 year old student population. A little over 10,000 of these students were new ones, leaving the large majority of students as returning; but many of these returning students had "stopped-out" of the College for anywhere from one to fourteen quarters. Almost 77% of the students were part-time (less than a 12 credit hour load), so that the overall average load was less than 8 credit hours. In addition, less than 10,000 students were officially placed in degree or certificate programs, and only 4,000 were placed in AA or AS programs, which are traditionally considered college transfer programs. Thus, NVCC is functioning as a very diverse institution, devoting only a small part of its resources to college transfer curricula. In fact, less than 30% of its students are in formal programs at all.

Enrollment patterns at NVCC are, as one might expect, extremely complex. For this reason, a single attrition rate from quarter to quarter or year to year is very misleading. During the last year, a study was carried out in response to the growing need for attrition data at the College, and to fulfill Federal Vocational Education Data System reporting requirements. It was found that, of an unduplicated annual headcount of approximately 51,800 in the academic year 1978 - 1979; 42% returned for classes at some time in 1979 - 1980; 3% graduated from formal programs; and the remaining 55% -- almost 29,000 students -- attended one or more quarters and then did not return at all the next year. Longer tracking of students done using student files on computer shows that 32% of all students enrolling for the first time in Fall, 1977 have not returned at all as of Fall 1981.

Such figures are alarming. NVCC shows a very high rate of attrition, and an extremely low rate of program placement and graduation. However, more information must be added to provide a balanced view of attrition at the College. In the first place, college enrollments, measured in terms of each Fall's headcount, have continued to grow, exceeding projections in almost every year since NVCC's beginnning in 1965. In one sense, then, the local community is "voting with its feet," and ever-increasing numbers are attracted to the College.

Second, reports from annual surveys of NVCC program graduates show that a steady 70 - 80% of them obtain jobs after graduation. and each year most obtain those jobs in their fields of study. General satisfaction with College services has been reported as well. In the NVCC's Office of Institutional Research's survey of 1979 - 1980 graduates, for example, 80% or better were satisfied with faculty, course content, grading and testing, and quality of instruction (Phillips 1982: 15-16). A pilot survey of a sample of the 29,000 non-returning 1978-79 students showed roughly the same level of satisfaction with College programs and services; the main reasons cited for leaving were (1) moving out of the area, and (2) unresolvable schedule conflicts.

The fact emerges that the figure of 55% as an attrition rate is absurd. Many of the 55% identified using the VEDS methodology will eventually return for more classes; for that matter, so will a percentage of the graduates. The computer program used to determine how many first-time enrollees in Fall 1977 returned to the College in subsequent quarters turned up no fewer than 1,341 distinct attendance patterns.

Thus far, only inter-quarter and inter-year attrition have been examined, and it has been shown that NVCC students, far from following a linear progress in their educational process at the College, follow cyclical attandance

patterns. The cycles are determined by student needs, goals, and desires, and range from continuous attendance for the sixteen quarters we have examined to attendance so sporadic that as many as fourteen quarters elapse between enrollments. This situation is complex enough, but it does not take into account withdrawal from one or more classes during a quarter, which is another form of attrition.

In Fall quarter, 1981, 22% of those students enrolled in courses at NVCC either withdrew (14%), or received grades of "F" or Unsatisfactory (8%). In addition, an as yet undetermined number of students applied to the College, were accepted, and never registered for classes, and another group registered for classes but dropped them before the enrollment census date, which is approximately nine days into the quarter. An overall estimate, then, of intra-quarter attrition due to withdrawals and failures would be between 25 and 30 percent.

At the present stage, we at Northern Virginia Community College are just beginning to identify the rates of inter-year, inter-quarter, and intra-quarter attrition. NVCC is an excellent example of the need for a careful examination of the types of attrition at a community college; it is also an example that shows the danger of using a linear model of the educational process to evaluate attrition at an institution where the attendance patterns are cyclical and created mainly by external forces. A critical question still remains, however, and that is, once attrition has been identified, what components of the various attrition types are undesirable?

The best way to make this point clear is to note that NVCC's annual (unduplicated headcount of credit students) growth rate has slowed from an astronomical 200% (between 1965 - 1966 and 1966 - 1967) to the percent rate of about 6% (between 1979 - 1980 and 1980 - 1981). This slowing growth rate is

due to two major factors: one is a leveling off of the population growth in most of the service area (though the outlying counties continue to grow rapidly); the other is the physical limit of space and faculty/staff at the five campuses. If the 55% year-to-year attrition rate were to drop by more than a few percentage points, with new student enrollments continuing at their present pace, the College would be absolutely unable to handle the numbers of students. As it is now, space is at a premium on all five campuses, and a complex system (the Productivity Analysis System, or PAS) has been implemented to allocate scarce faculty resources. In effect, some attrition is necessary to keep the College going as a functional system. If, in fact, the year-to-year attrition rate were reduced substantially, enrollments would quickly exceed functional limits, and students would begin leaving because of overcrowding, lack of available class sections, and unacceptably impersonal or poor instruction by an overloaded faculty. From a purely functional standpoint, some attrition is built-in to NVCC, and acts to help keep the institutional system in a kind of homeostatic equilibrium.

From an educational standpoint, it appears that much of the inter-quarter and inter-year attrition at NVCC is unavoidable. Preliminary studies do not point up dissatisfaction with the College as a reason for leaving; schedule conflicts and departure from the service area are the main reasons. As for "stopping-out" for one or more quarters, that too appears to be motivated by individual needs, goals, and other influences not under College control. To significantly alter the enrollment patterns to force them into a more linear mode would mean changing the fundamental nature of the College, and would in any case be close to impossible.

Given the nature of the College and its diverse and mobile service population, inter-year and inter-quarter attrition do not appear to be

changeable through College efforts; nor in most cases would this be desirable. Program-placed students are an exception to this fact, but counseling and faculty advisement services are already in place to deal with attrition among these students. It remains to target these services more effectively and, especially, to make program-placed students more aware of and willing to use them.

Efforts are now under way at Northern Virginia to study the intra-quarter class withdrawal attrition type. Using lists generated during registration and at the end of the quarter, three basic groups of leavers have been identified: those who register and fail to attend class (withdrawal during the first two weeks of the quarter); formal withdrawal between the second and sixth week of the quarter; and withdrawal or failure in the final period of the quarter. Beginning in Fall 1982, each of these groups will be surveyed to identify any major, consistent reasons for withdrawal. The ultimate goals of this effort will be (1) to establish a procedure whereby a student about to withdraw will be encouraged to have an exit interview with a counselor or faculty member; (2) to identify any variables which are factors in making a student likely to withdraw from some or all classes prematurely; and (3) to identify specific academic programs and courses with higher than normal withdrawal or failure rates, so that appropriate changes can be made.

This paper has tried to show that because of the unique nature of community colleges, no single model or calculation of attrition can fit them. Every community college falls somewhere on a continuum described here as leading from the degree-oriented "junior college" archetype at one end to the essentially consumer-oriented "urban college" archetype at the other. The rates and types of attrition at a given community college are dependent upon that college's position along the continuum, and upon factors unique to the

college's community. Attrition should not be a single "rate," but rather should be a carefully thought-out identification. First, the type(s) of attrition (e.g., stopping-out, leaving, inter-quarter, inter-year, and intra-quarter, etc.) should be identified. Next, the components of each attrition type should be separated out so that retention efforts are directed toward the undesirable components, and are not wasted on unavoidable or functional attrition. Northern Virginia Community College has been used to illustrate these points, and to show that something as important as student attrition requires very careful attention indeed.

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